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POCARIM policy brief : Impact, contribution and engagement of PhD graduates in social science and humanities

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EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



MAPPING THE POPULATION, CAREERS, MOBILITIES AND IMPACTS OF ADVANCED DEGREE GRADUATES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES (POCARIM)

2. IMPACT, CONTRIBUTION AND ENGAGEMENT OF PHD GRADUATES IN SOCIAL SCIENCE AND HUMANITIES.

Debbie Millard, December 2014

INTRODUCTION

Impact has traditionally been assessed in terms of academic impacts, based largely on publications in peer-reviewed journals and citations. In recent years, more attention has been paid to the impact of research on society at the national and European level. Funding bodies, such as the European Framework Programmes and UK research councils, have increasingly made impact a criteria for obtaining funding. This has increased with a focus on prioritising funding related to grand challenges in the EU and the UK. In the UK, impacts are being included in the Research Excellence Framework, which evaluates the quality of academic departments. Measuring impact has proved difficult. Even where academics are engaged with society, it is extremely difficult to assess the impact of these activities – in particular in the social sciences and humanities, where impacts are likely to be conceptual. This reports considers:

- (1) The extent to which SSH PhD holders seek to impact on society as opposed to impacting mainly in academia;
- (2) The range of engagement activities and stakeholders on whom the interviewees seek to impact;
- (3) The extent to which these various types of ‘engagement’ activities have an impact.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Academic impact and impact on society

A distinction noted by research policy-making organisations in Norway and the UK is that between ***academic impact*** and ***impact on society*** (Gustafsson and Hansen, 2013). According to RCUK for example, academic impact relates to the production of knowledge whereas societal impact includes a range of impacts, such as: enhancing cultural enrichment, quality of life, health and well-being contributing towards evidence-based policy making, influencing and informing practitioners and professional practice, changing

organizational culture and practices, and contributing to regeneration and economic development (RCUK, 2011).

The literature review carried out in the POCARIM project revealed that the impact of social sciences and humanities is not a major debate in most countries. Studies of impact were identified mainly in Norway, the UK, France and Spain. In the UK, pressures on higher education funding mean that academics are increasingly being asked to demonstrate the public benefit of their work (Maddrell, 2010). The UK's 2014 Research Excellence Framework, for the first time, included societal impacts in the assessment criteria (Williams, 2012). In other countries too, many respondents were engaged in a range of activities where they impact on society, as shown by the following table:

Table 1. Academic and societal impacts

Academic activity	%
Published textbooks, monographs, articles, books	90.3
Taught students	89.1
Managed/coordinated projects	66.9
Supervised graduate or PhD students	65.9
Societal impact activity	%
Taken part in knowledge transfer activities	67.4
Participated in policy-relevant conferences or events	62.1
Given interviews in media (radio, TV, newspapers)	52.8
Advised policy-actors on the local, regional, national or international level	37.1
Participated in societal or political committees	34.7
Been a board member/volunteer/advisor in an NGO	28.2
Developed innovative products	22.9
Been a board member in a company	11.3

Source: from POCARIM prepared by D. Kupiszewska

Unsurprisingly, given that the majority of interviewees were academics, the vast majority (around 90%) had been involved in publishing and teaching, and a high proportion had managed or coordinated projects and supervised graduate or PhD students. More than half had also taken part in activities that involved engaging with society, in particular participating in policy-relevant conferences and giving media interviews. Direct impacts on policy such as advising policymakers and NGOs, sitting on committees or boards and developing products were less common, although still not insignificant.

In the interviews, people were asked what their impacts were. A small number of people also commented on the extent to which they felt that academics should seek to impact on society. A minority of interviewees questioned the need to try to impact on society, arguing that basic research or 'blue skies' research was perfectly acceptable as an end in itself, perhaps in countries where the impact agenda had not taken hold. Others made the case that academics should seek to impact on society.

Engagement and commercialisation

Perkmann *et al.* (2013) highlight the distinction between **engagement** and **commercialisation**. They define engagement as, '*knowledge-related collaboration by academic researchers with non-academic organisations*'. This includes formal activities, such as collaborative research, contract research and consulting, as well as ad hoc advice and networking with practitioners.

Commercialisation involves the patenting and licensing of inventions and academic entrepreneurship. Perkmann *et al.* and others (e.g. D'Este and Patel, 2007) argue that, although engagement is far more common than commercialisation, academic research has focused on commercialisation. In social sciences and humanities, the nature of impacts is likely to be different, and commercialisation even less common than in science and technology.

The POCARIM survey and interviews confirm the variety of interactions of academics with society, only a minority being involved with commercial activities that relate to product development (22.9%). The following discusses the range of activities and main stakeholders that interviewees sought to engage with.

Practitioners

The interviews showed that many researchers in the POCARIM study have an impact on various types of practitioners, including those in business, public bodies such as schools and the police, and the NGO sector. Impacts were reported in the fields of law, psychology and psycho-analysis, primary and secondary teaching, businesses (through consultancy and supporting entrepreneurs), the police and libraries, and on music school directors. Academic work often encompasses working with research participants, for example interviewing and sharing results with businesses, teachers or other professions, as well as individuals.

Government and policymakers

It was common for respondents to be involved with policy advice at different levels of policymaking. The level of impact varies, with researchers seeking to impact at the municipal, regional, national or international level. Many respondents were fairly confident that their input had had an impact at the national, regional or municipal level, in particular in Northern European countries.

The public

According to the survey, just over 50% of people had given press interviews or had their work covered by the media. Most interviewees had given a small number of interviews or written articles, mostly in local newspapers. Some had received higher profile coverage in the national or international press and some had been interviewed extensively by the media. Humanities scholars impact on the preservation of cultural heritage, including languages, documents, artefacts, buildings and less tangible aspects of heritage, as well as on media and entertainment (e.g. music, theatre) (RAND Europe, 2010). Some people working in the arts were involved in developing museums, exhibitions, some had staged plays or organised music or arts festivals.

Engagement and impact

There is a distinction between *engagement* and *impact*. Academics are involved in a range of academic activities that involve engaging with societal stakeholders, however, this does not necessarily equate to impact. The POCARIM project showed that it is very difficult to demonstrate impact, confirmed also by Rand Europe (2010). Impact is influenced by many factors, including whether the impacts are direct or mediated, what spatial level the impact takes place at (local, regional, national or international) and the time it takes to have an impact. The POCARIM interviews revealed that, even where researchers are engaged at various levels with other stakeholders, it is hard to evaluate the impact of this work. It was frequently pointed out that their voice is only one of many, and that their own impact is likely to be modest.

The spatial context and timing also influence the extent to which impacts are direct or indirect. Some researchers interviewed had completed research, written reports or distributed research findings to international organisations including the UN, the World Bank, the ILO, the British Council, the EU and other organisations. The impact of their work was often unclear at the international level. However, some researchers could point to a greater impact at the national or regional level. It was pointed out by many interviewees that it takes years to produce results and to publish academic papers. A report by RAND Europe confirmed this, arguing that, *'Arts and humanities research impact tends to work cumulatively, through depth and/or breadth of research over many years'* (RAND Europe, 2010, page xiv of Executive Summary).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) Institutional leaders, as well as national and European policymakers should recognise the complex nature of impact, and review impact metrics to account for the nature of different types of research, the nature of knowledge (applied/basic/conceptual/theoretical) and its application, the spatial scale and timescale of impacts, and the stakeholders on whom academics seek to impact.
- (2) Academic reward systems should be changed to also reward achievements other than peer-reviewed publications. This could be achieved in different ways, and might include developing different career paths where impact is rewarded alongside traditional academic careers. Another option may be to employ others to focus on developing impacts rather than expecting academics to do this.

- (3) Doctoral and in-house training and awareness of impact should be developed. Training should incorporate transferable skills and activities related to impact. This might include, for example, writing and presenting for different audiences, Intellectual Property Rights, entrepreneurship, leadership, project management and other types of complimentary training.
- (4) Incentives should be increased for academics to develop academic outputs into policy and other types of outputs, products and programmes where appropriate.
- (5) Funding should be increased for exploiting the results of academic research, or translating academic results into products or programmes, including both SSH and STEM subjects.
- (6) More extensive links with other sectors, and in particular businesses, would increase awareness of the contribution of social sciences and humanities. More extensive use of secondments would facilitate this.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The findings contained in this brief are based on original work carried out in each of the POCARIM countries¹ and which includes: a review of the literature, policy and existing data, as well as original empirical survey and interview research. We draw out the implications of our findings for policymakers. The project consisted of two core phases. Each phase was coordinated by a key partner and carried out across the 13 countries by all partners.

Phase one of the research consisted of:

- A review of over 350 studies on the themes of: employment trends, career paths and graduate destinations; and impact, engagement and the contribution of SSH research (Gustafsson and Hansen, 2013).
- A review of policy approaches to interdisciplinarity, doctoral education as the first phase of an academic career, and responses to the economic crisis in terms of funding of doctoral education (Bitusikova, 2013).
- A review of existing statistical data sources on the population of social science and humanities researchers in the POCARIM countries and beyond (Canibano *et al.*, 2013).

Phase two consisted of:

- An online survey of 2,723 SSH doctoral graduates which asked a number of questions on the key themes of the project. These included the perceived impacts of respondents' work, and their international, intersectoral and interdisciplinary mobilities. Survey data was cleaned and analysed in SPSS and EXCEL (Kupiszewska *et al.*, 2013).
- In-depth, qualitative interviews with 25 respondents in each of the thirteen POCARIM countries. Each interview was transcribed, translated into English if necessary, and entered into a single NVIVO project file for analysis (Ackers *et al.*, 2013).

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¹ The countries in which the study was carried out were: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey and the UK.

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PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	(290770) Mapping the Population Careers, Mobilities and Impacts of Advanced Research Degree Graduates in Social Sciences and Humanities (POCARIM)
COORDINATOR	Professor Louise Ackers, University of Salford (H.L.Ackers@salford.ac.uk)
CONSORTIUM	University of Lausanne, Institut for Social Sciences, Lausanne, Switzerland Loughborough University, UK IKU Innovation Research Centre, Hungary Ceris-Cnr, Italy Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia Oxford Research AS, Norway CEFMR/IOM, Poland CESIS, Portugal University Mateja Bela, Slovakia CSIC-UPV, Spain Koç University, Turkey University of Salford, UK
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BUDGET	EU contribution: €996,847.00.
WEBSITE	http://www.salford.ac.uk/nmsw/research/research-projects/pocarim-home
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